

“Man down in the after line-handling station.”

After medical personnel had treated and stabilized both victims, they were taken to a hospital where they began their long road to recovery (*see sidebar*).

Mishap investigators learned the ship’s crew used operational risk management (ORM) techniques at the safety and navigational briefs before getting underway. The same risks identified in other similar evolutions were discussed. Consequently, the ship’s crew was comfortable; they thought doing as they had before would mitigate the risks of this operation. They failed to realize,

however, that each operation has its unique risks or hazards.

The ORM process helps people react and navigate through such situations. For example, step five of the process is to supervise, which includes watching for change. If an unexpected hazard develops during an operation, Sailors should use the time-critical (on-the-run) ORM process to analyze the hazard, make new risk decisions, and implement new controls. If that means canceling an event, going to all stop, or dropping the anchor, so be it. ☺

The author’s e-mail address is rkeim@safetycenter.navy.mil.

Returning to the Scene of a Tragedy

*By JOC Mary Camacho,
Staff, ComNavSurfPac*

A ship’s bell rings twice, and a voice on the 1MC announces, “Ensign, United States Navy, retired, departing.” For anyone new aboard this ship, you’re probably wondering why an ensign is retired and why he’s being rendered honors while departing. For those

Sailors who were aboard this ship in a foreign port last year, though, the answer is more apparent.

Navy photo by Ltjg. Jeff Hilton



Deck Seamanship

"It was kind of surreal. Your mind is in disbelief, but you immediately start thinking of the future."

The ensign in question is a former 2nd Division officer who was involved in a tragic line-handling mishap while the ship was leaving port. The 23-year-old ensign was safety observer in the after line-handling station when tugs suddenly and unexpectedly jerked the lines. A seaman in the line-handling party became entangled in the line and was pulled toward the 1-foot-by-2-foot chock—and to certain death if he were to be pulled through it. As the seaman struggled to free himself and the rest of the Sailors scrambled to safety, the ensign instinctively jumped in to try and free the seaman's leg.

His efforts may have saved the young seaman from dying, but both of them lost limbs. The ensign lost both legs below the knee, as well as a finger. The seaman lost his right leg and four fingers.

After eight months of extensive physical therapy, the ensign returned to his old ship to visit friends and shipmates. "I wanted to come back and see all the men and women, to say goodbye, and to bring closure to the accident," he said. "It wasn't as stressful as I thought it would be. Instead, it was interesting to see it in a peaceful manner."

As he walked around the ship, he talked to friends and revisited memories of his tragic day, including a stop in the after line-handling station. "I remember the whole thing up to the hospital," he recalled, saying he remained conscious the entire time, despite the incredible pain. "It was kind of surreal. Your mind is in disbelief, but you immediately start thinking of the future."

The ensign credits the ship's chaplain with helping him come to terms with the situation and his future as an amputee. "The chaplain calmed us, while all around, corpsmen and doctors

worked on our legs," the ensign said. "He asked me questions and got me thinking about my future and what I was going to do. I first thought I'd spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair."

With a medical retirement and full Navy benefits, however, the ensign now plans to attend law school. He's currently working as an advisor to Georgia Senator Max Cleland on the Armed Services Committee. The senator is a triple amputee and Vietnam veteran, who lost both legs and an arm in a land-mine accident.

"He had injuries more severe than mine, and he's a successful politician," the ensign said.

The ensign's recovery has been rapid. Within one month, he took his first steps on artificial limbs that look almost real. "They're incredibly life-like," he said, adding that the limbs were designed to match his skin tone and are custom-fitted to attach to his own limbs. "I was standing, then using a walker, then crutches, then a cane, and now I'm walking normally. You can't really tell I have prosthetic legs."

With his new legs, the ensign can do most anything he did before the mishap—even ski. He has stayed in great shape and is anxious to start running and working out again. He drives a car and had little difficulty walking up and down the ship's ladders during his visit.

When asked if he believes things happen to people for a predestined reason, he responded that he feels his accident was the worst and the best thing that could have happened to him. Because of the accident, he is more focused on his life and what he wants to do. "Everyone has challenges you don't think you can overcome, but if you maintain a positive attitude and work hard, life will turn out normal," he concluded. ☺

The author was assigned to the staff of Commander Seventh Fleet when she wrote this article.